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Rethinking Human Resources After COVID-19: A Bibliometric Analysis.

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Abstract: *Human Resources departments had to rethink strategies, come up with new ideas for the digital transition, and work out the best strategies for companies and employees. Our aim is to see how Human Resources from different fields cope with the aftermath of the pandemic and what has changed in their approaches. The primary purpose of this article is to identify the main post-pandemic directions of the human resources departments through bibliometric analysis. This study analyzed 28 articles from the post-pandemic era, extracted from the Web of Science database. The resulting articles, obtained by using two main keywords, "Human Resources" and "Post-pandemic", were analyzed using VOSviewer software. Our results highlight the most important trends identified in the specialized literature: digitalization, the well-being of employees, and the overall rethinking of organizational culture.*

Keywords: human resources; COVID-19; resilience; post-pandemic.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic caused significant changes in how organizations work, influencing practically every element of Human Resource Management (HRM). Companies from all fields have been affected by the pandemic; most of them were not prepared for a shock this powerful. Human Resource (HR) played a crucial role in reestablishing balance in the company through rebuilding procedures and adopting new ones. These sudden changes brought up new challenges for the HR function in supporting businesses in times of crisis. The pandemic caused a worldwide economic crisis, so we can admit that not only did one company have to change its HR approach, but also rethink their organizational culture, and all the companies from all over the world. Gary Jones made the following remark: "The key characteristic of an organization is the coordinated presence of people, not necessarily of things" (Gary, 1998, p. 664). So, organizations depend on people and people's efforts, and we can admit that when the pandemic started, everyone was affected by it, including thousands of employees, and therefore the HR departments and companies.

There are important differences between the cessation of the activity of organizations, caused by natural disasters, human intervention, technological breakdowns or operational defects, and those caused by pandemic events. These differences consist primarily of the widespread, severity, and duration of pandemic events and require

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organizations to take an approach that goes beyond traditional planning strategies (Cotelnic & Scarlat, 2020). Companies are driven by low motivation to invest in separate pandemic management capacities because these are low-probability events, and only the large, multinational companies would take into consideration a plan to minimize losses of the company in this scenario.

The pandemic has illustrated the true value of HRM and its importance in reconfiguring and redesigning a post-pandemic workplace with a lot more flexibility to accommodate workers' preferences, and crafting flexible and robust policies, processes, and practices in navigating challenges and difficulties (Manroop et al., 2025). The changes that had to be made, now that we look back, are more than simple reconfigurations of attitudes or work practices. They are part of an evolution in the way companies, in general, and human resource management (HRM), in particular, are rethinking the nature of work for the post-pandemic era (Manroop et al., 2025).

This article uses a bibliometric analysis to see how the academic research on HRM and HR evolved after COVID-19, using a literature review as the methodological approach. By analyzing patterns, keywords, authors, and trends identified in recent studies, the aim of this article is to identify the main directions of the research output of post-pandemic Human Resource. Due to our purpose, one of our objectives is to respond through this article to the next research question:

RQ1: What are the publication trends in this specific research field?

Literature review

Publications since the epidemic show not only the difficulties HRM has encountered, but also the ways in which HRM roles, priorities, and practices have changed to address these issues. The quick transition to remote work and the growing importance of digital transformation were the main topics of one of the first HR literature reactions to the epidemic. Gigauri (2020) accentuates that the pandemic forced organizations to accelerate digital processes and adopt remote-friendly policies. In her qualitative study based on expert interviews in Georgia, she finds that HR had to quickly adapt to ensure both work continuity and employee work-life balance, especially as uncertainty made long-term planning nearly impossible. Her findings reflect the global trend of HR teams acting as both crisis managers and change agents. The pandemic's pressure on organizational culture and leadership was also a major focus in literature. Human Resource leaders were not only responsible for implementing safety and digital measures but also for driving cultural transformation. According to Luburić and Vučinić (2021), post-pandemic recovery must include both the economic revival of organizations and the physical and emotional recovery of employees. Their article highlights a people-centered approach to leadership, where trust, respect, and solidarity are seen as important values in exploring change. Also, during the COVID-19 pandemic, besides the psychological factors and emotional well-being, the attention fell on the flexibility of the workforce. Work-life balance, once a secondary HR concern, became central to organizational success because our personal lives and professional lives changed drastically. This trend is visible in practice, as companies began offering hybrid models, mental health resources, and more supportive communication systems (Majumder & Biswas, 2023)

Strategic HR responses are explored in current specialized literature, more than that, were analyzed the challenges HR faced in the pandemic to offer possible solutions and actions for HRM in response to the post-pandemic period. Through specialized literature, we can find multiple approaches of the authors related to the challenges HR faced. Chatleska et al. (2023), identify three key challenges: creating safe and tech-integrated organizational cultures, improving employee retention strategies, and designing adaptive work structures like hybrid models. Their findings are based on literature reviews, secondary data analysis, and interviews. They point out that HR's strategic role must now include long-term planning for flexibility, digital infrastructure, and continuous employee engagement, rather than short-term administrative fixes. Another interesting finding is

related to the generational changes in companies and how the crisis accelerated generational shifts in leadership across industries (Vázquez de Príncipe, 2024). As older workers retire, Millennials and Gen Z are becoming most of the workforce. These generations have different expectations, including more purpose-driven work, better flexibility, and inclusive cultures. The pandemic acted like a fast-forward button to this generational shift, making it happen faster and more visibly than it might have otherwise. This shift is part of a bigger transformation to the "holistically intelligent" and emotional aware leadership, relevant especially in the post-pandemic world.

All companies have been affected by the pandemic, and HR departments in all areas have had to rebuild strategies based on the field of work, whether we are referring to public healthcare, tourism/hospitality, banking, education or others. In the next section we will review the strategies and challenges that specific fields got through during the Corona Virus pandemic and what happened post-pandemic. In an article that used survey data from Italian hospital managers, Ceschel et al. (2024) highlighted the importance of HR system strength in a post-pandemic healthcare system. They demonstrate that strong HRM systems not only improve engagement and proactive behaviors but also reduce the negative effects of bureaucratic limitations. This is crucial in public health organizations where the stakes are high, and procedures are rigid. The study emphasizes the necessity of strong, cohesive HR procedures that can be modified even in highly regulated contexts. A sector-specific perspective is provided by Aşkun and Çizel (2024), who investigate career management challenges in the hospitality industry in Türkiye. According to their study, which is based on grounded theory and hotel manager interviews, post-pandemic unemployment rates have gotten worse, which is why HR is investing in sustainable career development techniques. Due to travel restrictions and service shutdowns, the hospitality industry had to rebuild its talent pipeline using effective recruitment, retention, and upskilling tactics, with a focus on younger employees.

A central theme identified in the reviewed literature is the integration of digital technologies, which represents an emerging theme. Another theme is one we addressed previously but we will dive deeper in this paragraph, prioritization of workforce adaptability. The crisis accelerated the digitization of HR practices and emphasized the strategic importance of upskilling. For instance, digital capabilities such as learning agility and innovation responsiveness were found to be essential in the service sector workforce (Zayed et al., 2022). Similarly, in the face of digital acceleration, the Southeast Asian FinTech industry faced difficulties striking a balance between mental health and personnel retention (Wu & Kao, 2022). During the pandemic, online learning platforms and AI-supported hiring systems were viable options for HR transformation and continuity (Azizi et al., 2021). It has been demonstrated that employee behaviour resilience is highly dependent on their capacity to embrace and adjust to digital tools, especially when used in highly involved HR systems (Cahyadi et al., 2024). According to Bouzakhem et al. (2023), skill development programs were more effective in this context when they were supported by trust in leadership. On the other hand, flexible work arrangements created additional obstacles to collaboration that needed to be addressed by organised support networks (Cheng et al., 2023).

Findings showing that typical transactional leadership was inefficient in a disrupted environment reinforced the need for flexible leadership. Instead, flexible HR practices were more successful in maintaining worker performance (AlAbri et al., 2022). Adaptability in the retail industry means reorganising job functions to accommodate flexible scheduling and cross-functional abilities (Ahmed & Akaak, 2024). COVID-19 highlighted the significance of data-driven workforce strategies and revealed systemic problems in HR planning, even in healthcare systems, which are generally slower to adapt (Bustamante Izquierdo et al., 2023). These findings support the idea that, in the post-pandemic environment, adaptability and digital ability are now characteristics of successful HRM.
In parallel, as we discussed before, another important theme is the one regarding human-centered HR practices and psychological safety surfaced. The epidemic raised awareness

of equality and emotional health as key HR initiatives. It was discovered that maintaining employee well-being during times of crisis required supportive HR strategies (Johar et al., 2022). In order to manage both operational change and emotional reassurance within organisations, human resource professionals assumed a mediator position (Gonçalves et al., 2021). Importantly, workers required psychological safety, acknowledgement, and unambiguous digital rules in order to succeed; autonomy in remote work situations was insufficient on its own to sustain employee engagement (Radu et al., 2023).

During this period, the impact of psychological contracts and perceived integrity on employee retention became more visible (Bussin & Swart-Opperman, 2021). Tessema et al. (2023) came to a similar result and argued for leadership that encourages open communication and inclusiveness. In India, the need for improved emotional support networks has increased as millennial workers have observed a blurring of the lines between their personal and professional lives (Sengupta & Al-Khalifa, 2022). In response, managers faced the problem of creating a balance between employee engagement, well-being expectations, and hybrid work demands (Law & Koh, 2023). The pandemic exposed significant imperfections in HR frameworks that had previously placed less emphasis on emotional well-being, particularly in communication and stress management techniques (Zhong et al., 2021). Employee outcomes were more favorable in organizations where high-performance work systems were paired with leadership consistency and empathy (Zhiqiang et al., 2021). When combined, these results imply that HRM has experienced two changes. While it is increasingly based on psychological safety, emotional support, and justice, it also depends mostly on digital competence, agility, and skill practices.

Methodology

To identify how Human Resources strategies and approaches changed over the pandemic, we used a bibliometric analysis approach. The data source selected for the bibliometric analysis was Web of Science Core Collection. To ensure a comprehensive yet focused retrieval of relevant studies, the search was structured using a Boolean query targeting multiple fields. The following syntax was applied:

((Topic= (“Human Resources)) AND Topic= (“Post-pandemic”))

This query allowed the inclusion of publications in which both phrases appeared in the title, abstract, keyword plus, and author keywords. Firstly, our literature search began with the identification of 65 publications with no duplicates, so all 65 records proceeded to screening. To refine the scope of the analysis and for studies to be included in the analysis, a set of filters was applied: documents written only in English, document type restricted to articles, and only open-access publications. After applying these criteria, the final search was 32 articles. After a manual filtering of the articles, their number reached 28. Each document was then carefully reviewed to determine if it qualified for the review, as shown in Figure 1. The complete analysis provided in our study was based on this final collection of 28 papers. The selection procedure made sure that the included material was suitable and relevant to the goals of the study. To complete the analysis, we must transfer the data provided from Web of Science to Vos Viewer. We will interpret a few maps based on: Countries Co-authorship, Keyword co-occurrences and map-departments.

Trends identified in specialized literature

In this chapter, we will go through the practical implications that we discovered with the help of the analysis done with Vosviewer. We will analyze based on several criteria, how the publications on this topic have evolved, how the authors collaborated with each other, what are the most frequently used keywords, and what they convey.

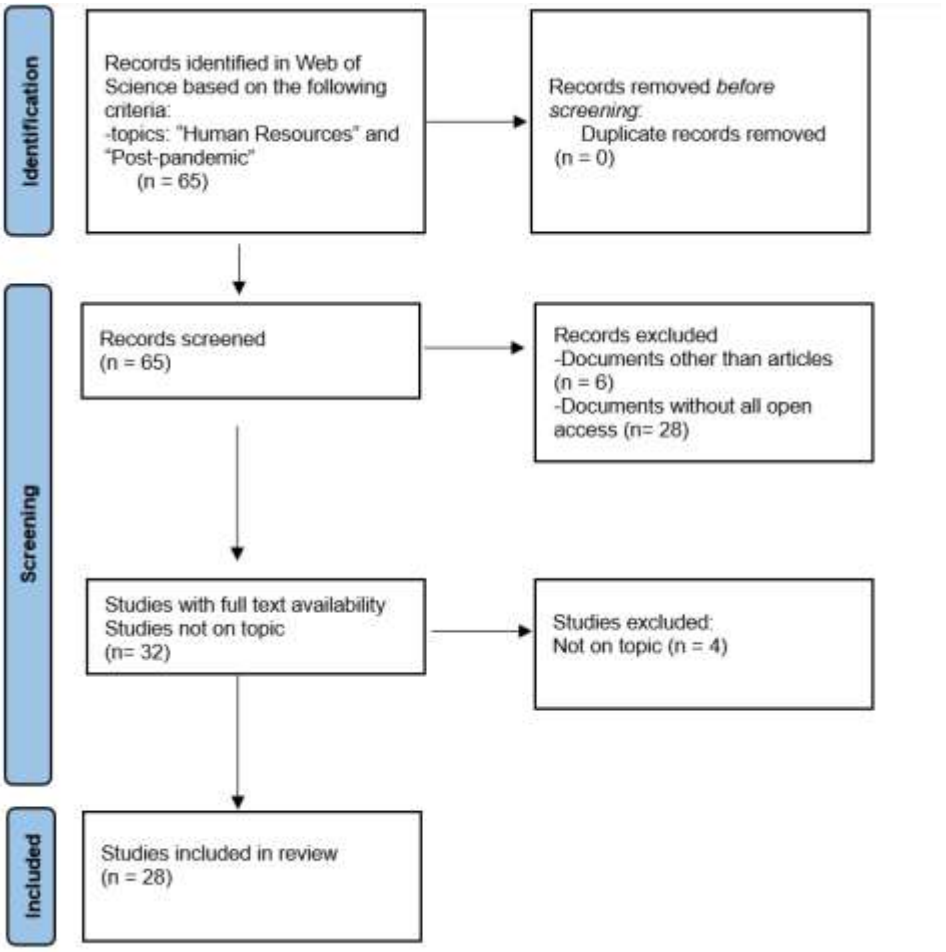

Figure 1. The PRISMA flowchart
(Source: Authors' research)

As shown in Figure 2, academic interest in post-pandemic Human Resource Management grew significantly from 2022. Due to the changes and research delays, only one relevant article was published in 2021. However, starting in 2022, the number of articles grew to nine annually. This suggests that post-pandemic HR practices have not only maintained a scholarly emphasis but have also been acknowledged as a reliable area of study within organizational and management studies.

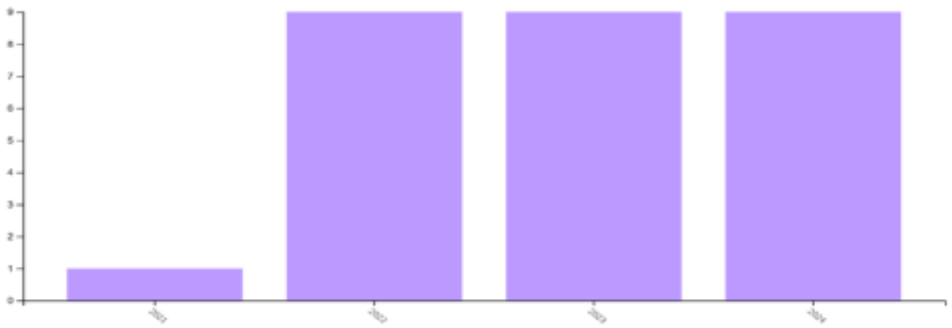

Figure 2. Evolution of research output post-pandemic
(Source: Authors' research with VOSviewer)

The distribution of publications by countries, as shown in Figure 3, indicates a geographically varied interest in the subject of HR and HRM in the aftermath of the epidemic. With four publications, Canada has the most publications, according to the statistics, indicating an overall scholarly emphasis on HR transformation and organizational resilience in North America. With three contributions, Brazil also notice itself as an important research center in Latin America, which may suggest that structural issues and workforce adaptation are receiving more attention in rising countries.

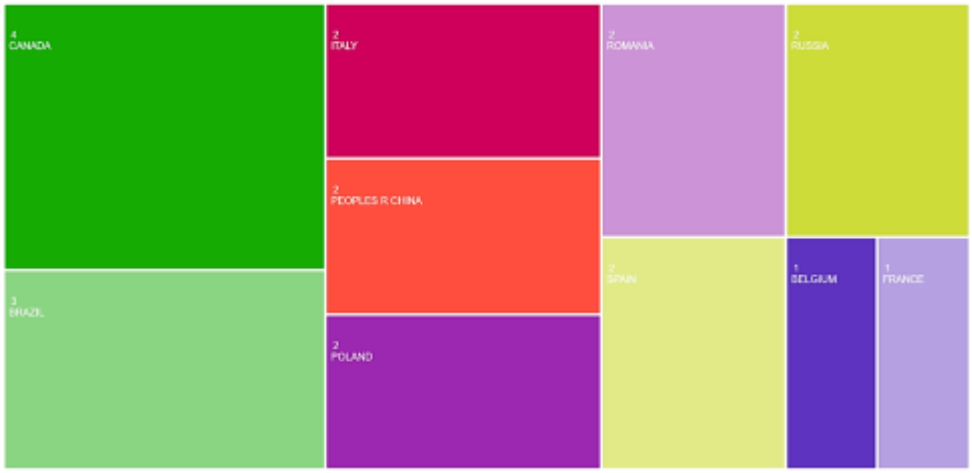

Figure 3. Top 10 countries with the most publications about HR post-pandemic.
(Source: Authors's research with VOSviewer)

Russia, Spain, Poland, Romania, Italy, and China all contributed with two publications. This second tier highlights the international nature of HR difficulties and changes during the post-pandemic recovery by highlighting a wide and dispersed academic interest across Europe and Asia. Finally, with only one publication each, Belgium and France show that there are regional but relevant academic attempts to address the effects of COVID-19 on HR procedures. Despite their low numbers, these examples still add to the changing global discourse. Overall, the data indicates that both developed and developing nations are interested in post-pandemic HR.

To properly understand the impact of the pandemic on all HR fields we should look at Figure 4. As we can see in Figure 4, articles have been published by various universities with various departments. Certainly, the department (field in this case) with the most publications is the medical field.

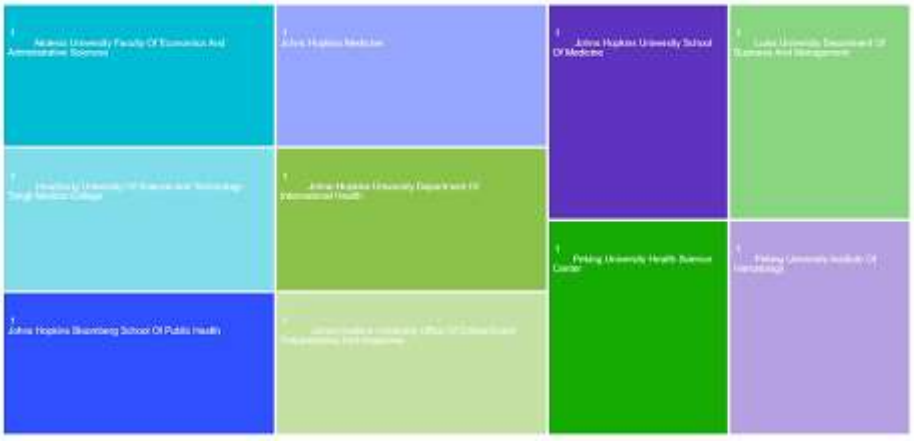

Figure 4. Map of affiliations with departments
(Source: Authors' research with VOSviewer)

This can easily be interpreted, because during the pandemic the medical field was the most affected, so probably it is also the one with most of the changes on the HR part. Maybe the COVID-19 pandemic had the biggest impact because it did not occur in only one country and worldwide. Other fields of publications in this case are economics, business and management and even law.

Figure 5 is providing important information about the intern collaborations from Portugal. Figure 5 is the networking visualization map of co-authorship by organizations; 4 universities met the thresholds of 1 publication and the minimum number of citations to be 3. The institutions involved include ISMAT – Instituto Superior Manuel Teixeira Gomes, Portucalense University, Polytechnic Institute of Viseu, and the Portuguese Institute of Administration and Marketing (IPAM Porto); The fact that these organizations are linked by obvious collaboration links indicates that there is a nationwide research network that has addressed the topic trough cooperative academic efforts.

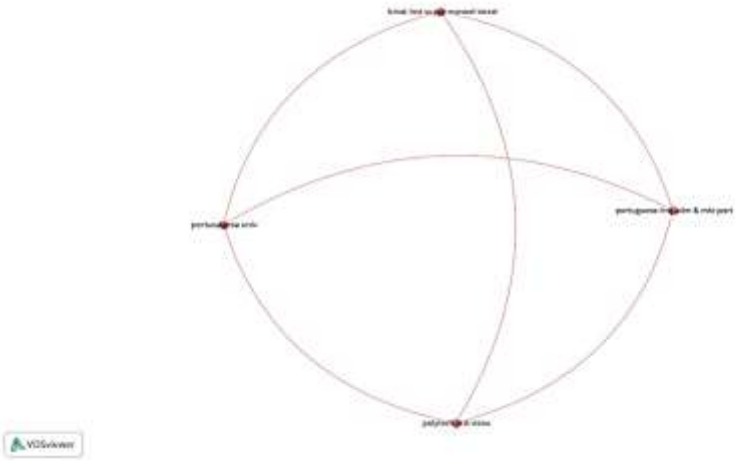

Figure 5. Networking visualization map of co-authorship by organizations.
(Source: Authors' research with Vosviewer)

For a better understanding of how those articles explored the topic we generated a keywords co-occurrence map with Vos Viewer. Out of 171 keywords, 7 met the threshold - minimum number of occurrences of a keyword to be 3, forming a map with 2 clusters with 15 links and a total link strength of 20.

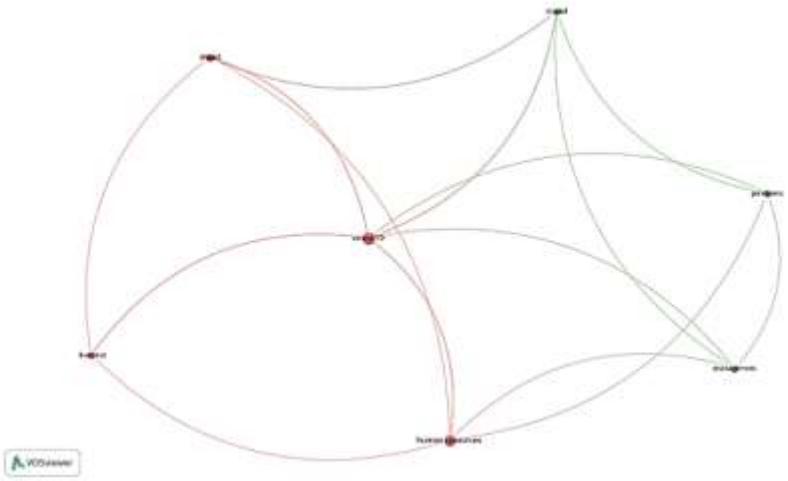

Figure 6. Network visualization of keyword co-occurrences
(Source: Authors's research with VOSviewer)

Firstly, the red cluster, which is centered on the terms "COVID-19," "impact," "burnout," and "human resources," reflects the immediate effects of the pandemic, on Human Resources procedures and approaches. We can take into consideration how closely "burnout" and "impact" are related, because it can suggest that the psychological impact on employees is still one of the most urgent issues in post-pandemic HR academic literature. The placement of "human resources" next to "COVID-19" highlights the core of the research. Secondly, the green cluster, which is composed of words like "management," "pandemic," and "model," represents a more structural and strategic approach to study. The word "model" plays a key role here, suggesting that researchers have attempted to develop frameworks and reorganize Human Resources systems that are more suitable for a post-pandemic environment. The word "COVID-19' acts like a bridge between the two clusters in this map, linking the more human perspective with the organizational one together. The map reveals a dual approach of the specialized literature, approach that we brought up through the article, one bends down on the impact that the pandemic had on the workforce, and the other one bends over the adaptive behavior of HRM.

Discussion and conclusions

The COVID-19 epidemic marked all of us, marked us psychologically, mentally and marked the way we live our everyday lives. The same thing happened to Human Resource; the pandemic marked the way HR operates now in the post-pandemic times. Regarding the research question (RQ1) we found out that 3 main trends are addressed in specialized literature. First, the specialized literature has shown us an increase in HR's attention to the emotional and the well-being of the employees. The HR departments adopt a people-centered approach after pandemic as employees in different fields have been affected by juggling remote work and keeping up with the stress at work. On the other hand, another direction of the specialized literature is based on the strategic changes of HR and how HR had to adapt procedures, tactics and approaches after the pandemic. By answering the research question, we also managed to achieve our goal of identifying the main directions of the research output of post-pandemic Human Resource. Finally, and probably the most important trend, is related to digitalization. The qualitative analysis highlighted that the integration of technology is now a strategic necessity, speaking from AI-based recruitment systems to digital upskilling strategies that enhance employee resilience. These are necessities and no longer additional tactics.

Crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic expose the weaknesses in traditional HRM systems and show that organizations need HR strategies that go beyond efficiency and cost control. Instead, strategic HRM must focus on building organizational capabilities such as resilience, adaptability, and learning. As Minbaeva and Navrbjerg highlight in their article, the HR must focus now on the well-being of the workforce and see the pandemic as a "stress test" that all the companies went through. The results of this "stress test" are quietly shown in this article as HRM already started balancing the organizational restructuring with the well-being of the employees and the digitalization.

We should take into consideration that the bibliometric analysis is based on a relatively small dataset of 28 documents retrieved only from the ISI Web of Science (WoS) database, and that the analysis tracked articles that focused on the strategies of HR post-pandemic or others bibliometric analysis. The practical implications presented in this article can serve as a foundation for future research exploring post-pandemic HR attitudes and transformations.

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